Marissa Roecks

Tori Saneda: Anth&206

July 31st, 2010

*Transient Experience of an Itinerant Culture: Ethnography of Transit Microcosm*

**Introduction:**

To decrease my carbon footprint, to make use of free transportation, to get to work, to get to school, to explore, to get away, because you want to, because you need to, just to get to where you’re going: whatever the reason, whatever the destination people have been making use of public transit for hundreds of years. These systems of transportation have gone through a complex metamorphosis from the horse drawn carriages and cars to trolleys and trains to buses and monorails; and throughout this process we have been making use of various technologies to get to where we are going.

I have chosen the bus as the venue for my ethnography because it is an integral part of our communities and the living breathing circulatory system that connects people to parks, stores, school, and work and, more importantly, to each other. I myself have utilized the bus system regularly to inexpensively and conveniently get to where I am going. Within this study, I will include information from my observations, interpretations of interactions and I will attempt to evaluate, explain and understand the particular idiosyncrasies that render this itinerant culture so uniquely intriguing. The information will be presented in a narrative style with sub headings linearly arranged thematically throughout.

It is important to note that I cannot know the story all the way to the bus barn, my awareness stops when the bus reaches the end of the line and begins only once it reaches its first stop; I cannot know the intimate stories of each passenger, who they are, their reasons for traveling via bus, where they are going, why they are going and so one, what I can observe are their actions throughout the bus riding process, how they board, how they comport themselves and what artifacts they interact with from bus passes and coinage, to books and I-pods, to wheel chairs and clothing choice. People’s reasons for riding the bus may stem from sustainability, poverty, necessity or convenience, they may be seasoned regulars or nervous one-timers but, as I state previously, whatever assumption I make regarding reason is merely conjecture, an educated guess and not hard fact. I also cannot know how all of the particular transit subcultures differ from each other by time of day, destination and location nor how each of these carries its own stigma for example: riding the bus down First Avenue in Seattle is warned against especially in the evening hours. Other differences include routes that are maintained with older buses, by different companies and which have different rules.

The grand scope of bus culture in general cannot be looked at as a whole, it is important therefore, we remain aware throughout this ethnography that illustrated here is a mere microcosm, and single example of a sub-culture in a single city, in just one state, located in one country, and not a reflection of the vast macrocosm of bus culture. I would like to use this ethnography to explore the culture that exists on just two of these buses, the 522 from Woodinville to Seattle, run by sound transit, and the 312 from Bothell to Seattle, run by metro, and use the data I have collected to contemplate the reasons behind certain attitudes and unspoken agreements that are adopted when people board them.

**Methodology:**

I conducted my study by riding the 522 and 312 buses to and from Kenmore to Seattle at various times during the day. I took detailed notes alternately via computer and by hand. I did my best to record all of the details around me, the interactions, the people, the artifacts and objects within the environment and the changing nature of the landscape around me. I paid attention to external stimuli such as sights and sounds and even the variations in advertisements along the ceiling which may be indicative of advertisement agencies’ assumptions regarding the type of people who may be riding the bus. I wore uninteresting clothing and attempted to remain inconspicuous. I fit into the picture as another passenger, and remained apart from the actions around me so as not to influence any native behaviorisms. How others reacted to each other and to me were indicators of how any generic passenger may experience a similar journey via bus.

As I have already taken the bus many times I am both able to drawn on past experience and enrich the readers understanding of “transit culture.” Due to this intimate perspective, I must also be aware of personal bias and be sure to objectively evaluate my data without making assumptions based on my experience. In the past, I was not aiming at writing an ethnography and therefore my perspective during data collection is quite different than when I was a passenger focused on my own agenda. I find it important to note that my own gender bias will also affect my perspective as the rules of conduct aboard the bus relate differently across genders; in other words, a male ethnographer exploring this subculture may yield different data results and a different perspective.

My goal is to think about something that has become common place in my life experience from a new point of view and from the perspective of creating an objective description that will accurately relate this subculture to people who have not experienced it or wish to experience it in a new way, as I do: through the medium of an ethnography. My world view necessarily influences my perceptions and interpretations of data and, in order to decrease this bias, I must take my own native realism into account when evaluating data. I personally am more apt to view the world optimistically and thinking the best of people rather than guessing at a more negative potential, this tendency, too, I will have to keep in check in order to reduce subjectivity in my interpretations of the following events.

**Data Presentation and analysis:**

*Choosing to ride the bus:*

As noted in the introduction, people chose to ride buses and to avoid them for a variety of reasons. Some people may be afraid of them, of getting lost, of the lack of control, some people may adore them as they remove the responsibility of paying attention from travel and allow one to focus on other tasks and others may simply ride the bus indifferent to all of these possibilities. People’s destinations are innumerable and with the growing emphasis on sustainability, many are attempting to “be green” rather than drive a car. All of the information regarding why people chose to ride the bus is not specific to the 533 or 312 bus route as I cannot know where people are going or why. This is purely conjecture based on past experience to provide background information. I can attempt to observe where people go as the leave the bus, but this is obviously difficult, and I can attempt to surmise where they are headed based on what artifacts they carry with them, a backpack may be destined for school, a brief case for work, but since I chose to avoid open contact with the individuals on the bus, I can only guess.

*The Bus:*

The bus itself differs in appears from route to route and depending on who operates them. Metro buses are darkly colored and often have advertisement on the side while sound transit is often white without side panels and sometimes with translucent advertisements spanning the entirety of the bus and its windows. The metro operated 312 is often a double bus with something akin to an accordion coving its mid section which allows it to make wide turns despite its bulk. On the interior this results in a mid section that turns independent of the bus. The handholds and seats are arranged the same on both buses with side seating in the front which can be lifted to allow space for a wheel chair, followed by a series of two-seater chairs lining either side of a center aisle, much like a plane. Before reaching the end of the bus the right side seating stops to allow room for the back doors before resuming a short while and becoming side seating one more. This side seating wraps around the backmost portion of the bus in a C shape in such a way that those in the back most corners still have leg room. The metro bus features green seats with a water repellant covering while sound transit is furnished with blue vinyl seats and a plastic covering over the headrest. On both buses, and on any bus in the interests of safety, there are two sets of doors, one opposite the drive and the other further down on that same side. The doors are controlled by the bus driver and open inwardly presumably to avoid passengers falling out. The stairs leading to and from these doors are silver grooved metal and have various bits of flotsam caught within their ridges on both buses. The state of the floor coupled with the clothing donned by the passengers are good indicators of the current season or weather pattern. The windows can be adjusted by passengers at the top and the whole panel may be removed in the event of an emergency. Both Buses also have a top hatch that leads to the buses roof and is often used as a vent to allow air to circulate throughout the bus on warm days. Both buses do not use electrical power as some do, as they must traverse the freeway between Woodinville and Seattle. The Sound transit operated 522 bus features side panel strips that are yellow and indicate that a stop is requested upon pressing. The metro buses utilize a kind of rope system strung along the sides of the bus which yield the same result upon pulling; both make a short bell sound. Along the topes of the windows are a series of panels that allow for removable advertisement which advertise volunteers needed for hepatitis vaccines, child adoption services, counseling and psychology services family planning and, on the metro buses, a neat outlet for the community to share poetry. The metro bus also has signs encouraging that passengers remain away of their volume when listening to music or using a phone and witty “enjoy your ride” type statements which outline rules and make you smile. These advertisements seem to indicate that the advertisers have a particular notion about who rides the buses and what sort of products they may be interested in. In the interests of brevity, I will focus on my experiences aboard the 312 henceforth.

*Getting on the bus:*

I can observe how people board the bus, and many of the interactions that occur thereafter once my audience is captive. As people board the bus it is clear who has done this a million times over and those when can’t quite remember the proper ritual. Those who are more familiar with the process charge up the stairs confidently and scan their card or pay their dues confidently and without hesitation. Those who are more tentative I would guess are slightly unsure of the proper procedure. Several artifacts I should mention include various incarnations of the bus pass, including the “Orca” card which is blue and appears to be the new thing everyone is doing. I know from my own experience that this is a recent development in busing culture and that some of the tentativeness stems from uncertainly around this new technology. Instead of sliding a card or dropping coins in the slot, the orca card is held against a reader to the left as you enter and beeps green upon acceptance. It is interesting to note that several people have done away with the sliding of their bus cards and passes and simply flash them at the driver as they enter. The driver is an interesting part of the equation as well as people interact with him or her differently often according to confidence levels. Drivers differ from bus to bus as well and some are very outgoing and friendly and others seem to hate their occupation. Some people wave at the driver or greet him or her as they board and others simply get on. An interesting occurrence is when a paraplegic wishes to board, and a special mechanism is then engaged so that they may get aboard, then, people sitting in the front most section move back to allow the disabled person a space and the driver carefully secures the chair. The rest of the passengers appear very good natured about this process and are very patient throughout the delay. Children and families present an interesting dynamic as well.

*Choosing a sea/Sitting:*

In choosing a seat and sitting, I found that, by observing posture, eye-contact and watching for artifacts of distraction I could learn a lot about the bus culture. Some people avoided sitting next to others until the last possible moment or chose to pass up more comfortable seating in order to site alone or to maintain a comfortable distance from a stranger. People already sitting seem to avoid others sitting next to them by blocking adjoining seats with bags or other artifacts until the last possible moment, that borderline between innocent oblivion and rudeness, pretending not to have noticed how full the bus had become. The elderly are treated with respect and difference, given front seats and never asked to stand unless they insist. When the bus is full people without seats stand holding the handles and bars with various degrees of success denoting their relative experience levels. Some elderly folk, men especially, choose to stand regardless of an offer, perhaps as a matter of pride. Women are also often offered a seat when the buss is full. A kind of chivalry exists aboard the buses.

*Individuals on the bus:*

Most individuals are traveling alone but some are not. Those that stood out to me in particular included a couple alternatively dressed in what may be described as “Punk” or “Emo” attire, the girl with dyed hair and the boy with an unbuttoned over shirt and nothing more, both wore all black. While, as seems a common practice aboard the bus, most showed no reaction to the people around them, I sensed internally that I was made a little uncomfortable by their energy, but also acknowledged that this was a learned behavior and a perhaps unwarranted unease. One woman was applying makeup in a very precise way and appeared to be annoying the girl sharing a seat beside her in the process. One woman seemed thoroughly engrossed in her kindle and many had I-pods and cell phones and a few had computers. One particular pattern which occurred again and again: people would board the bus and just as soon as they found a seat, they would just a quickly disengage from the environment via headphones, books, texting and all manor if artifacts of distraction or even nodding off. These common traits may reflect a kind of self-preservation that keeps strangers who know nothing about one another from interacting with potential threats: The age old “don’t talk to strangers” mantra. Cultural values appear to include remaining unassuming and avoiding interaction based on artifacts, clothing choice, body language, countenance or the façade of not paying attention.

*Group Dynamic/Mentality:*

While some are regulars others you will never meet again, from the standpoint of interaction, this creates an air of mystery and intrigue. Some approach this as an opportunity to make social connections, but most seem to shun any kind of recognition of strangers, despite mutual stories. They seem to fear the unknown, the uncontrollable factor of passengers who may choice to board or disembark at any time at their leisure as is the nature of a public bus. I find it quite interesting that this itinerant culture seems to spend most of its time aboard the bus trying to be somewhere else, distracting themselves via headphones, I-pods, phones, books, kindles, closed eyes, anything to avoid interacting with the others on the bus. People though pretending to be uninterested and attempting to remain inconspicuous are often actually quite aware of their space and know the dynamic: who is where, where their stuff is etcetera. There seems to be an unspoken code avoid to eye contact, if it is made by accident it is quickly broken.

Some passenger are outgoing but most seem detached cold and bored. Many may have been taught that the bus was dangerous, that traveling alone entailed certain risks and therefore avoiding eye contact was a means of self preservation. Staring out windows watching the scenery pass by or intently scanning for destination markers is a common method of distraction used as well, perhaps to ensure they indicate the appropriate stop. People avoid contact with disabled people as well and seem unsure how to interact with abnormality. This comes into play quite frequently in the form of mentally disabled individuals who ride the buses quite often. Ethnocentrism finds its place aboard as well as many people seem more wary of various races then not. It would appear that often those taking the bus are impoverished and less educated and therefore subscribe to these social stereotypes. This is displayed in how minority groups tend to congregate: African Americans stick to themselves in cultural groups as do Asians.

*Getting off the Bus:*

The procedure for getting off the bus is similar to getting on and depending on the time of day, one may need to pay as the leave or as they board and this dictates whether they use the front doors or back doors to disembark. One of the interesting things to note is when people in wheel chairs need to get off, the process is long and drawn out, but nobody speaks a word, the only wait patiently for the process to run its course. This may stem from a belief that it is impolite to speak of another disability or how that disability may be inconveniencing a person without a disability, perhaps out of a sense of guilt or quiet thankfulness.

*Outside perspective on bus riding:*

Community and public transit have come to be known as different things to different people whether riders partake frequently or infrequently, clandestinely or openly, with shame or pride, with independence or empowerment, hyper aware or distracted, nervousness or confidence, together or alone, coming or going. As mentioned in the section entitled, “Choosing to Ride the Bus,” some may be embarrassed to be aboard, may feel a sense of shame or may avoid it all together due to a perceived social stigma that riding the bus somehow denotes poverty or a low social class. Such connotations and assumptions could be used to public benefit if the stigma were reversed as seems to be happening, that encouraged community transit in light of carpooling’s reduced impact on the environment. If more people were encouraged to travel via bus, then fewer cars would fill the roads reducing traffic and pollution. This process is a doubled edged sword however as increases in passenger load coupled with tax cuts (as happened during the recession) resulting in an over taxed bus system and very cramped and disgruntled passengers. Also, unless a new fuel source is discovered, the issue of pollution will not simply go away with decreases in vehicle density. Encouraging bus riding is a good first step however and has the added benefit of encouraging people to both exercise and explore their communities anew.

**Ethnology (cross-cultural comparison):**

* 1. 4-5 paragraphs comparing subculture you studied w/ that of another students, note similarities/differences and propose explanations (hypothesis) for who those differences and similarities exist.

**Conclusion:**

* 1. What research still needs to be done?
  2. Talk about how your argument needs further discussion (it doesn’t end there, need bus drivers perspective, need knowledge of passengers their destinations, life stories, why they ride the bus… in order to make a better rounded picture)
  3. Parts of your question that remain unanswered
  4. Implications of you findings (how avoidance mentality may be extrapolated to reference Washington culture as a whole from city to city, how it difference from city to city or from bus to bus, different routes have different mentalities and connotations, different destinations carry different assumptions, hospital=sick?? 1st avenue=sketchy? Different types of people modes of dress….